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# Conservation Systems Research

## *Producer Perspectives on the Conservation Security Program in Alabama*

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The Conservation Security Program (CSP) provides an innovative method for rewarding farmers for conservation efforts and environmental stewardship on their lands. The program is voluntary and pays farmers to maintain and enhance conservation practices that meet guidelines established by the USDA National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). In 2005, we interviewed three focus groups of crop and animal producers in northern, central, and southern Alabama concerning their experiences, problems, and concerns about conservation and the CSP. This document summarizes their insights.

## **Producer Perspectives**

### *Access to Information and Public Perception*

Information released in the agricultural media about the CSP has been limited. One farmer noted, "*It is hard to have an opinion when you haven't been approached.*" Based on the limited information, farmers felt that qualification for upper tier levels in the CSP would be too costly, given potentially stringent resource requirements for an entire farm operation.

### *The Cost of Conservation*

Farmers felt they had to pay too much for NRCS-approved conservation facilities, such as terraces and flood control structures, which they thought were often over-designed. At times, these structures cost up to three times as much as farmers could do it themselves, even with cost-share assistance.

### *The Future of Farm Programs*

With the potential reductions in traditional farm support programs under future trade agreements, conservation payments may become a new form of income support for farmers. These changes make farmers “uneasy” about their future, in part due to the importance of traditional farm payments. Farmers felt that the CSP may not provide an adequate substitute, given the diversity in geography and farm needs around the state of Alabama. In response to uncertainty, farmers have diversified their operations by investing in timber production and commercial hunting operations.

### *Rental Lands and the Conservation Security Program*

The CSP requires farmers to have control of the land they operate for the period of their CSP contract (5 to 10 years). Many of the farmers interviewed rented land on a cash basis for 1 to 2 years without a written lease or agreement, potentially posing a problem for CSP qualification. One farmer stated, “Our leases are sun-up to sun-down.” Furthermore, farmers are

facing more competition for land from urban development and government programs, such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Some farmers felt that if landowners can obtain CSP payments by increasing rental rates, then the CSP may indirectly decrease land availability by discouraging farmers from renting.

### *Development and Urban Sprawl*

In some areas of Alabama, rising land prices (due to residential and commercial development) make it more attractive for landowners to sell their land, decreasing farmland availability. A respondent stated, “It takes five months to grow a cotton crop, and five months to build a house.” Furthermore, development, such as gravel roads, commercial parking lots, and large industrial complexes, are significant sources of pollution that are ignored, while the finger is pointed at the farmer.

### *Conservation Assistance*

The majority of the farmers interviewed were satisfied with their local NRCS personnel, but felt that NRCS offices were under-staffed and under-funded. The top-down decision-making approach used by NRCS, with more decision-making being done at the national level, results in a lack of awareness of local needs for conservation implementation and a move away from “locally-led” conservation.

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